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AUTHOR Klug, Wayne
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ABSTRACT

A process study was conducted in two phases to measure the effects of whether a mother's participation in a Toughlove program improved her child's behavior. During phase 1, small-group Toughlove meetings were used for observation and then were tape-recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were coded to identify instances of social support; encouragement of assertiveness; emotional separation from adolescents; and help in overcoming a sense of guilt. In phase 2, 75 individuals from 8 states who participated in similar training workshops responded to a questionnaire exploring variables similar to those coded by observers. Analysis of quantitative and qualitative data suggests that, for these parents, regaining control of their families was a complex problem. Among nonassertive mothers, gains in assertiveness are significant. When nonassertive mothers entered the Toughlove program, they were offered new behavioral repertoires. Within six months, their children's antisocial behaviors declined. Results suggest that community support and validation represent a crucial variable that provides the support to improve adolescent behavior. Results also point to the fact that quantitative and qualitative methodologies properly reinforce one another. While each approach alone may be necessary, it is in combination that they illuminate the interactions between parent-child processes and community supports. (Contains 2 tables, 1 figure, and 16 references.) (Author/JDM)

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Nonassertive mothers, aggressive teens: Toughlove as a community intervention

Wayne Klug, Ph.D.

Berkshire Community College, Pittsfield, MA 01201
(413) 499-4660, ext. 321
wklug@cc.berkshire.org

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Introduction

Tempted by the availability of drugs and alcohol, exposed to frequent violence, courted by gangs and cults, American adolescents are growing up in increasingly dangerous circumstances. Many of their parents, unfamiliar with such stressors from their own youth and uncertain how to respond, find themselves increasingly unable to cope as their children become more difficult to control.

Among the parents of delinquent teenagers, service providers often encounter a striking nonassertiveness which seems to encourage the aggression with which their children test and even taunt them in a futile bid to elicit reasonable limits. Each family's "private" crisis, replicated in other homes, subsequently contributes to the public experience of delinquency within a fragmented adult community.

As teenagers test their parents and find no response, do their provocations escalate into out-of-control behaviors? Could parental nonassertiveness and isolation from the community conspire to exacerbate the chaos threatening these households? This pair of studies examined the relationship between maternal assertiveness and adolescent antisocial conduct as they vary over the course of six months in Toughlove, the controversial organization for parents of teenagers with out-of-control behaviors.

Informing the studies was a theoretical model in which interpersonal styles occupy a continuum extending from nonassertiveness through assertiveness and into aggressiveness. Associating these strategies with Baumrind's permissive, authoritative, and authoritarian parenting styles, the studies explored a developmental relationship between degree of parental assertiveness and extent of adolescent antisocial behavior, as this relationship develops within a context of community-based training and support.

Methods (Study 1)

This was a process study that made use of quantitative and qualitative data from both groups and individual subjects, gathered in two different phases. During phase one, six small-group Toughlove meetings were used for purposes of observation; meetings were tape-recorded and transcribed. These meetings served communities ranging from urban blue-collar to suburban middle-class.

With three observers working independently, these transcripts were coded to identify instances in which members (1) provide social support, (2) encourage assertiveness, (3) urge others to separate emotionally from their adolescents, (4) help others to overcome a sense of guilt or shame, and (5) reflect or invoke the influence of the larger Toughlove organization. Of the hundreds of statements contained in the transcripts, a majority were identifiable as reflecting these process variables.

During phase two, 75 individual participants from eight states were recruited at both regional and national training workshops. By mail, they responded to some three dozen items on a Likert-type questionnaire exploring variables similar to those being coded by observers; based on their responses, means were calculated and a principal components analysis was performed. On a behavior checklist, each respondent was also asked to report the estimated frequencies with which his or her child had demonstrated any of several disruptive or illegal behaviors during the month prior to their having joined Toughlove, and again during the most recent month.

Findings (Study 1)

Observers' ratings of meeting transcripts (phase one) revealed that expressions of *social support* represented 43% of the statements codable as process variables. Expressions of *assertiveness training* represented another 40%. Interactions which encouraged *separation* from a child, reflected *organizational influences*, or helped members to *overcome guilt or shame* represented 10%, 6%, and 2% respectively. In 86% of these ratings, all three observers agreed; in 14% they disagreed.

Responding to the questionnaire (phase two), participants validated these ratings by most strongly agreeing with items intended to measure *assertiveness training*, *social support*, and *community support* (means of 1.66, 1.7, and 2.45 on a 5-point scale, respectively). Half of the participants (n=38) responded to the behavior checklist. These parents' retrospective characterizations of their children's conduct suggested significant reductions in nine of their antisocial behaviors over the course of the parents' participation in Toughlove, notwithstanding a likely self-selection bias. These differences are depicted in Table 1, below.

Table 1
Pre- and Post-Means of Nine Antisocial Adolescent Behaviors As Reported by Parents

BEHAVIOR	n	Pre-Mean	Post-Mean	Improved	Worse	Same	T	P
defied a curfew	26	14.04	1.41	24	2	0	5.15	.0001
stayed out	27	5.04	.61	24	3	0	4.63	.0001
ran away	22	2.71	.46	17	5	0	3.22	.0034
lied to parent	30	17.43	5.33	26	2	2	4.35	.0002
stole from parent	22	4.32	.14	20	1	1	3.87	.0006
cursed parent	32	15.61	1.91	30	1	1	6.76	.0001
was truant	24	10.04	1.04	21	2	1	4.04	.0004
used alcohol	21	8.19	2.19	13	4	4	2.32	.0297
used marijuana	23	8.91	1.55	18	2	3	3.52	.0018

Methods (Study 2)

Employing a prospective design, again with quantitative and qualitative methodologies, the second (outcome) study followed 33 families weekly for six months after their entry into the program. Drawn from six New England Toughlove groups, the 67 participants included 44 parents and 23 children (ages 13 to 19). Most of the statistical analyses were performed on data from 29 mothers and two fathers who functioned as the primary parents in 31 households--that is, all of the single parents and, in two-parent families, the one who more regularly attended meetings and interacted with the child.

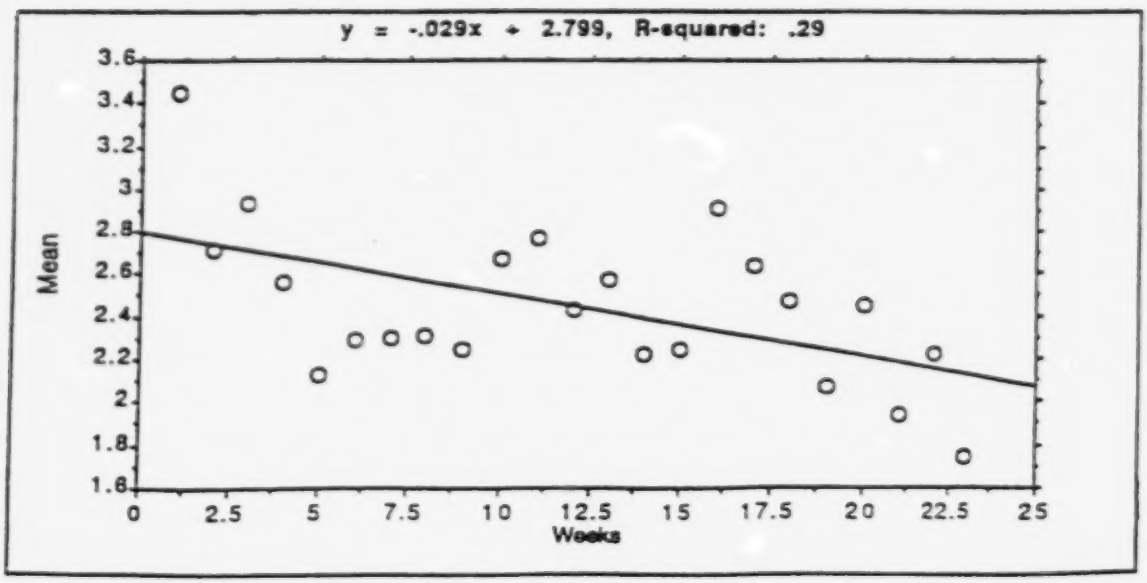
Pre- and post-measures used were the Rathus Assertiveness, Rosenberg Self-Esteem, and Rotter Locus of Control Inventories (for parents), and the Millon Adolescent Personality Inventory (for children). Both generations responded to "pre" and "post" checklists for adolescent antisocial behavior and parental assertiveness. Parents also completed the behavior checklist weekly throughout the six months. Pre- and post-Toughlove mean scores on all instruments were subjected to a Matched-Pairs t-test. Correlation coefficients for parental assertiveness score differences and adolescent antisocial behavior differences were calculated. Because a number of initially assertive or aggressive mothers unforeseeably entered the study, a median split was imposed on pre-scores and statistical analyses were performed again with data from the nonassertive group only.

All participants also responded to structured entry and exit interviews, which were tape-recorded and transcribed. Each transcription was given two readings, and from it salient remarks pertaining both to the child's behavior and to other family issues were excerpted into pre- and post-Toughlove columns on a "briefing sheet". Where possible, parent's and child's versions were aligned and cross-referenced. To explore the personal meaning of statistical results, specific references to assertiveness or aggressiveness, parental consistency or inconsistency, and the generations' attitudes toward each other were highlighted.

Quantitative Findings (Study 2)

Difference scores revealed that primary parents (mostly mothers) achieved significant gains in assertiveness and self-esteem, but not in internality of locus of control. Plotted as slopes that display reported number of antisocial behaviors as a function of weeks, their children's delinquency declined significantly (that is, the mean of these slopes was a significantly negative slope). Also plotted was a composite slope, as shown in Figure 1, with each point representing that week's mean score for all the adolescents.

Figure 1
Composite Weekly Behavior Slope For All Adolescent Subjects, as Reported by Mothers



Mothers' gains (in assertiveness and self-esteem) and children's improvements (in behavior and self-esteem, respectively) correlated significantly for mothers entering Toughlove low in assertiveness, but not for the larger, higher-assertive entering group (see Table 2).

Table 2
Comparative Analysis of Correlations With All Mothers and With Initially Nonassertive Mothers

Correlation in Difference Scores	All Mothers	Nonassertive Mothers
Parents' Assertiveness & Adolescents' Behavior Slopes	-.10	**-.60**
Parents' Self-Esteem & Adolescents' Self-Esteem	.20	**.57**

Notes: Negative behavior slopes denote improved behaviors.

Bold type indicates statistical significance.

Qualitative Findings (Study 2)

Interview data from both generations richly supplemented these results, especially with regard to four recurring themes. First, they spelled out the implications of *a newfound parental consistency*—and other forms of assertiveness—for out-of-control adolescent behavior. This theme was exemplified by one couple's comments about the consistency that came to replace "quarreling and fudging". It was exemplified in remarks by a timid single mother—"I'm a doormat"—who later reported, "I feel more assertive, so I'm not afraid to approach her with demands." It was heard in the exit interviews of many teens—for example, "Mom's not afraid I'm gonna lash back" and "Dad never ignores my behavior now". Variations on this theme comprise one of the most prominent lines of commentary.

Second, the qualitative data evinced associated *reductions in aggressiveness* by both adults and children within certain households. Subjects who initially described their homes as a "battleground"

or a "war zone"—with parents "bullying" and "yelling", and teenagers "slamming doors and pulling knives"—reported a palpable calming trend over the course of the study period. "There's no screaming or crying now—we try to leave an explosive situation" was a typical observation. "It feels nice to be in the family" was another. These reports suggest that becoming firmer and more consistent requires less aggressiveness and more detachment.

Third, interview data revealed that parents attained *a greater respect for developmental differences and generational boundaries* between themselves and their children. Typically, those who would "reduce ourselves to [the child's] level, argue and debate", later recognized the mistake of having "played the older sibling—not the parent—role"; they insisted that "my rights are, not to be treated as her equal". Also frequently reported was a new, associated sense of clarity about family relations. "The house became more structured and therefore a lot easier to live in," was a typical comment. Mothers reported a corresponding change of attitude: "I can honestly say I like the kid now."

Most prominent in the exit interviews of parents, finally, was a *recognition and appreciation of the social support* they had received—and been able to give—in the Toughlove organization. Although they varied in their ability to define other factors that may have been operating in the group, they were almost unanimous in describing the greatly relieving experience of being validated by peers in similar circumstances. "I've got this great big family called Toughlove," one mother reported. "If it wasn't for their support, we would've lost our minds. I think we've been able to help other people in the process, too." Another observed: "I was looking for an answer and what I found was support. I could tell immediately that this is where I was supposed to be."

Conclusion

Both quantitative and qualitative data suggest that for these parents the effort to regain control of their families is a complex one. Among nonassertive mothers, gains in assertiveness are significant—but modest. At every turn, teenagers confound their parents' experiments with consistency. Indeed, a number of adults are unable to sustain their membership in Toughlove.

This struggle is nicely sketched in the composite slope depicting weekly changes in adolescent behavior (Figure 1), whose shape contains several interesting features. After nine weeks of fairly stable improvement, a notable deterioration occurs in weeks 10 and 11, followed by renewed improvement over the next month. Again in week 16, behavior deteriorates even more sharply and then once again improves—more markedly than before—over the last two months of the study. This pattern suggests two distinct moments at which adolescents mount significant challenges to their parents' newfound

resolve—and parents overcome these challenges. Smaller variations over several of the other weeks reveal a saw-toothed pattern to much of the progress and vindicate those parents who described the six-month study period as "a roller coaster ride".

Interview data suggest that the processes of community support and validation represent a crucial variable which, if taken together with gains in certain skills, provides not only the necessary but the sufficient conditions to spawn improved adolescent behaviors. Conversely, the parents' relatively modest gains in assertiveness and self-esteem, if taken alone, would seem to suggest that a mere assertiveness training program—offered without benefit of support, role modeling, or mentoring by those who have recently solved similar problems—might well prove inadequate to the daunting task these parents face.

Sustained by a supportive community of peers, nonassertive parents new to Toughlove may both learn the skills and find the strength to meet the challenges posed by increasingly provocative adolescents. If behind their children's contemptuous incitements can be glimpsed a protest aimed at the abdication of adults, then a concerted effort to reconstitute a healthy adult community is precisely the right response. Formerly isolated and overwhelmed, they now become a *group* of increasingly capable parents collectively nurturing a group of difficult teens.

For their part, the adolescents begin to perceive their parents as less helpless, more resourceful, and better connected. Formerly invested in taunting their elders to define the limits of acceptable behavior, the teens now begin to realize that their parents have found the strength to respond—and their own behavior follows suit. The possibility that for both generations the power of group identification may mediate between gains in parental assertiveness and reductions in adolescent antisocial behavior, lends support to the Toughlove principle that "individuals do not raise children; communities raise children".

In this research, qualitative evidence helps to elucidate the meaning of statistical data. Taken together, both forms suggest the following outline of changes in family process: When nonassertive mothers enter the Toughlove program, they are challenged, informed, and offered new behavioral repertoires. Within six months, most of them score significant gains in assertiveness. Over the same period of time, their children's antisocial behavior declines to a significant degree, and both theirs and their children's self-esteem improves. Parents become less reactive, enmeshed, and coercive; more initiating, consistent, and calm. The generations become more strongly identified as such, and family relations assume a greater clarity and mutual respect.

Finally, the data underscore the recognition that this therapeutic process is largely a social one. They point to the central role played by an organization that embodies both the characteristics and philosophy of the self-help movement, operating nonprofessionally, rotating leadership, and providing reciprocal involvement with a community of peers facing similar problems. As it organizes neighborly resources to resolve family crises, the group's creative application of these principles exemplifies community psychology's uniquely effective contribution.

This study also reminds us that quantitative and qualitative methodologies properly reinforce one another. While each approach alone may be necessary, only in combination are they sufficient to illuminate interactions between parent-child processes and community supports. What parents and their children say—and how their accounts alter over time—gives subjective meaning to the measured changes in attitudes and behaviors. If our discipline has learned to marshall a variety of resources to improve quality of life, why should it not also employ this method to evaluate its effects?

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